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ABSTRACT

A documents librarian and a communication instructor attempted to promote the use of government publications by providing bibliographic instruction as an integral part of an argumentation course in the Department of Communication and Theatre at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. Specialized lectures related to the needs of the particular class and the topics chosen by students for assigned research project were presented by library faculty. Lectures covered general library usage, types of government publications and access tools, and search strategies for individual student topics. Students were asked to complete a questionnaire at the completion of their projects. Their responses indicated that the lecture and question and answer sessions were successful in providing sufficient information and encouraging student use of government publications, as well as some use of these materials in other courses. An analysis of the sources cited by the students in their final projects is provided, and some implications of this type of bibliographic instruction are considered. (JVP)

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REACHING THE UNDERGRADUATE WITH GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS

A CASE STUDY IN BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION

by

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REACHING THE UNDERGRADUATE WITH GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS -- A CASE STUDY IN BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION

Carol A. Berthold and Barbara J. Ford[1]

Government publications comprise an information source greatly underutilized by library patrons. Because they are often not accessible through conventional library tools, patrons need guidance in the ways of locating information found in government publications.

In an academic setting, Knapp's study explored the method of developing closer ties between the library and the teaching function. One of her findings was that library instruction is most effective if it is featured as an integral part of the content of courses.[2] Based on this premise, the documents librarian and a communication instructor in an institution of higher education attempted to promote the use of government publications in course-related instruction.

This paper is a report of the bibliographic instruction on government publications provided for students enrolled in an argumentation course, offered annually in the Department of Communication and Theatre at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. As the course was planned, the librarian and instructor consulted to decide when and how to incorporate library instruction.

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[2]Knapp, Patricia B. The Monteith College Library Experiment. New York: Scarecrow Press, 1966.

The sixteen students enrolled in the course were given four assignments, one of which was their major project and which accounted for forty percent of their grades. This assignment called for an affirmative brief on a proposition of policy to be presented as an outline of an argument which calls for a change in an established policy. The brief was also to include supporting evidence. Students were told that "extensive research on your topic is a necessity. Quality of evidence, as well as quantity, will be considered in assigning the grade." Briefs were graded on organization, analysis, evidence, and reasoning.

In preparation for researching the brief, several lectures were given by library faculty. A general lecture on library usage was given by a member of the library reference department. Two class periods were then devoted to lectures on government publications. The lectures were scheduled after assignments were given by the instructor and students had selected their topics. Topics selected by the students included law enforcement, corporal punishment, the electoral college, television violence, marijuana, cigarette sales, methadone clinics, minimum annual income, trial of juveniles as adults, obscenity and pornography, prostitution, social security, mandatory retirement, and television commercials.

The lectures on government publications were specialized lectures related to the needs of the particular class and the students' topics.

The first lecture attempted to place government publications in the context of the information structure of our society and to provide the fundamentals of research methodologies for these materials. To create an awareness of the wealth of information available in government publications they were discussed according to types of publications--congressional,

public administration, informational, reports, research--with many examples presented to students and made available for their inspection. Access tools were emphasized and instructional aids including transparencies of indexes and abstracts were used during the lecture to show how government publications can be located and used. The brochure of the Documents Department which lists many of the indexes was also distributed. Students were then urged to go to the Documents Department to look for materials on their topics and to seek assistance from the documents librarians if needed.

The second lecture focused on search strategies for individual student topics. Following brief comments by the documents librarian, students were encouraged to ask questions. The instructor and librarian were able to clarify usage of sources and access tools and to give suggestions to students who were having difficulty finding materials on their topics. Emphasis was on planning and implementing search strategies to locate materials, evaluating sources located, and selecting those appropriate to their needs. Many students expressed amazement at the government sources they had located. Following this lecture additional help was given to students as needed at the Documents Reference Desk.

An attempt was made to evaluate the extent government publications were indeed used by the students.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Students were asked to complete a questionnaire concerning their use of government publications at the time they handed their final projects to the instructor. (See Figure A.) Of the sixteen students who submitted final projects, fourteen completed the questionnaire.

FIGURE A

COMMTH 212 - ARGUMENTATION
FALL 1977

Questions below relate to a study being made on the use of government documents in this course. Your brief responses will be appreciated.

NAME_____

1. Did you use the government documents section of the library in preparing your brief? Yes_____ No_____

2. Prior to Barbara Ford's lecture on government documents earlier in this course, had you known about government publications? Yes_____ No_____
   If so, please indicate briefly how you learned of them:

   _____

   _____

3. Had you ever used government publications for a research project, a paper, or your own personal use before this course? Yes_____ No_____

4. As a consequence of what you learned about government publications in this course, did you use the government documents section for research for any other class during this quarter? Yes_____ No_____

5. Do you see a way to use government publications after you finish your undergraduate work? Yes_____ No_____

   If "yes" please indicate briefly:_____

   _____

   _____

6. Do you feel that the lecture and the question and answer session on the use of government publications were worthwhile?

   Yes_____ No_____ Did not attend either session_____

7. How would you improve upon the information and services relating to the use of government documents for future students in this course?

   _____

   _____

   _____

8. Please indicate your address for future follow-up questionnaires on this subject:

   _____

   _____

   _____

Thanks.

The first question which the students were asked was: "Did you use the government documents section of the library in preparing your brief?" Twelve students responded "yes" and two students responded "no." The students were then asked the second question: "Prior to Barbara Ford's lecture on government documents earlier in this course, had you known about government publications?" Seven students responded "yes" and seven students responded "no." Those who responded affirmatively were also asked to indicate briefly how they had learned of government publications. Six students indicated that they had learned about government publications in a previous course; three of these students specifically mentioned English classes, and one learned of them through his enrollment in the argumentation course the previous year, when a similar lecture had been given. One student learned of the existence of government publications through another student.

In response to the third question, "Had you ever used government publications for a research project, a paper, or your own personal use before this course?" three students responded "yes" and eleven students responded "no." Of the twelve students who indicated the use of government documents for this assignment, eleven indicated that they had not been prior users of government documents. Of the seven students who indicated a prior knowledge of government publications, four indicated that they had used the government publications section of the library in preparing this assignment. Thus, of the students who had prior knowledge of documents over half made actual use of the information for the first time. Of the seven students who indicated no prior knowledge of government publications, all seven indicated use of the documents section of the library in prepar-

ing their briefs. On the basis of the use pattern, the lecture and question-and-answer session would seem to have been highly effective for this particular class.

The students were then asked whether, as a consequence of what they learned about government publications in this course, they had used the government publications section for research for any other class during the quarter. Four students indicated that they had, while ten students indicated that they had not done so.

When asked whether they see a way to use government publications after finishing their undergraduate work, eleven students indicated that they did, and two students responded that they did not. One student stated that she did not know what she would be doing in the future and did not respond. Those responding affirmatively were asked to indicate briefly how they thought they would use government publications in the future. Eight students indicated that they might use government publications in future research or in graduate school. Three students indicated the possibility of use for their own personal benefit, such as to gain information in consumer affairs or for general knowledge. Two students indicated that government publications might be used by them in their line of work. One such student, who works in the news media, indicated that he might use government publications to research topics of interest or newsworthy topics.

Finally, the students were asked if they felt that "the lecture and the question-and-answer session on the use of government publications were worthwhile." All fourteen of the students responding to the questionnaire answered "yes." When asked how they would improve upon the information and services relating to the use of government publications for future

students in the course, twelve students offered comments. Five students suggested that they be taken into the publications areas and shown how to find materials. Other suggestions were more general: more student participation, more information and better service. Two students felt that there was no need for improvement, indicating that the lectures were "well-planned" and that the explanations were "comprehensive, detailed, and succinct." Two students did not comment or suggest improvements.

The results of the questionnaire indicate that the lecture and question-and-answer sessions were successful in informing students on the use of government publications, as well as in encouraging their use. The evidence of the success can initially be found in the large percentage of students who indicated a use of government publications in their final projects. When one examines the percentage of students who had prior knowledge of government publications, but who had not previously used this rich source of information, the success of the two sessions is apparent. The sessions were able to provide sufficient information, to tie the information to the major assignment, and consequently, to motivate the students to use the publications for this course. The close relationship between the lectures on government publications and the course assignment seems to indicate one way in which the problem of a lack of such relationship, as described by Whitbeck and Hernon,[3] can be overcome. Some student use of the materials in other courses was also found.

[3]Whitbeck, George W. and Hernon, Peter, "Bibliographic Instruction in Government Publications: Lecture Programs and their Evaluation in American Academic Depository Libraries," Government Publications Review 4 (1977), 6. Also see p.7 for the advantage of this relationship in terms of student motivation.

The results of the questionnaire also indicate that future use of government publications is foreseen by the students. The nature of the responses suggests that most students seem to see a school-related use for government publications in the future, but fewer seem to see a personal or work-related use. This pattern of reponses indicates that in future lectures on the use of government publications, more emphasis might be given to the usefulness of these publications beyond course work.

At this point, the librarian and instructor have no way of knowing whether these students will, in fact, derive a long-term benefit from their knowledge of the existence of government publications for research and information purposes. Students were asked to provide their addresses at the end of the questionnaire so that follow-up studies might be conducted. Until such studies are done, however, the results of the questions on future use can be taken only as a sign of the students' present intentions.

SURVEY OF FINAL PROJECTS

The final projects of all sixteen students in the course were examined for the sources and dates of the evidence which they used to support their arguments.

The number of sources cited by each student was noted, as was the date of each source, and the number of times the source was cited. Each source was also classified as a "government publication," "not a government publication," or "publication source not known," that is, it could not be determined from the information provided by the students whether or not the source was a government publication. The number of sources and the number

of citations used by each student were then totaled by publication category in an attempt to compare the frequency of use of government and non-government publications. The dates of sources were also averaged to compare recency of publication of government and non-government sources.

Students used 133 sources of evidence in their briefs. Of these, 37 were government publications, 93 were non-government publications, and 3 were published by an undetermined source. Thirteen students cited at least one government publication as a source of evidence; three students cited no government publications. The students citing government publications listed an average of 2.85 different government publications per project. An average of 5.81 separate non-government publications were cited by all students.

The total number of citations was 284; each source was cited an average of 2.14 times. Of the 284 citations, 102 were government publications, 180 were non-government publications, and 4 were from undetermined sources. The thirteen students who cited government publications used an average of 7.85 government publication citations per project. An average of 11.13 non-government citations were used per project.

A comparison of the number of different sources cited with the number of citations reveals that each government publication cited was listed an average of 2.76 times and each non-governmental publication was used an average of 1.91 times, with all sources being used an average of 2.14 times.

Three students who answered "yes" to the question "Did you use the government documents section of the library in preparing your brief?" did not cite any government documents in their project. Both students who answered "no" to the question used one government publication in their projects.

The dates of the different sources of evidence were averaged to compare recency of publication for government and non-government sources. Government publications had an average publication date of 1972 and non-governmental publications had an average date of 1971.

The survey of the students' final projects revealed that slightly more than one out of every four sources used was a government publication and slightly more than one out of every three pieces of evidence cited came from a government publication. Four out of five students cited one or more government publications. The government sources used by students in this project tended to have a more recent publication date on the average than non-government sources, despite the fact that non-government sources outnumbered government sources by a ratio of 2.5 to 1.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the results of this survey were based on a limited number of students and there was no control group for comparison, both the instructor and librarian felt that more government publications were used by the students in the argumentation class than is generally true in similar projects when students have not had bibliographic instruction in their use. Both feel that the information sessions were quite successful in creating a knowledge and interest in the use of government publications on the part of the students in this course.

The instructor sees a farther-reaching use for other courses in her discipline as well as for those in related fields. For example, an argumentation course for honors students could profitably use congressional hearings and government-sponsored studies as the "textual material" for individual and group projects and debates on contemporary and controversial

topics. Although they should not provide the only sources of material, government publications are probably the richest source for arguments and facts supporting either side of an issue. A course in modern public address, which might well include a study of recent U. S. Presidents' addresses, would certainly result in use of government publications by both instructor and students.

The librarian felt after evaluating the sources used in the students papers that the sessions had been successful in making students aware of an underutilized source of information and in helping them locate government publications relevant to their research topics. Such presentations will be expanded and refined and offered to instructors in various departments.

Because this experience included only a few students in one course, one cannot generalize about the results of this experience in bibliographic instruction for government publications. Nevertheless, the point has been made: students can be informed about and encouraged to use government publications in course-related instruction. To study this in more depth grant support would be needed to develop more extensive evaluation methods.